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ABSTRACT

Formal and functional similarities in a learner's first and second languages (L1 and L2) facilitate the perception of cross-linguistic equivalence between individual items (phonemes, morphemes, words, and phrases). The beginning foreign language learner makes frequent use of these perceived equivalences when he learns to understand L2 items. This receptive competence in turn creates a basis for development of productive competence. Cross-linguistic similarities alone may not directly facilitate the mastery of L2 systems for use in production, but the learner who can easily perceive cross-linguistic equivalences will easily build a basic receptive competence that can be converted into productive competence. Furthermore, although the L2 learner whose L1 is a related language may have problems with minimally distinct patterns and other factors, he will probably make fewer errors that seriously affect communication than the learner whose L1 and L2 are not related. (MSE)

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ON THE DISTINCTIONS OF ITEM LEARNING VS. SYSTEM LEARNING AND RECEPTIVE COMPETENCE VS. PRODUCTIVE COMPETENCE IN RELATION TO THE ROLE OF L1 IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ON THE DISTINCTIONS OF ITEM LEARNING VS. SYSTEM LEARNING AND RECEPTIVE COMPETENCE VS. PRODUCTIVE COMPETENCE IN RELATION TO THE ROLE OF L1 IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Foreign language learners are frequently told by their teachers, and rightly so, that it is absolutely essential to have a good mastery of the fundamental elements of another language. A sufficiently stable construction, it is said, can be erected only if the basis is solid enough.

In the light of this one might expect the very beginnings of the foreign language learning process and the development of a basic receptive competence to have attracted more attention by applied linguists than they actually have. Applied linguists have, however, been primarily concerned with the development of the grammatical system of the learner's interlanguage, and the material for their analysis often appears to have been confined to that type which most clearly illustrates each scholar's ideas about this system or these systems. Frequently, too, applied linguistic studies have been very restricted in that they have dealt with only one narrowly defined system, say, learners' production of negative sentences or relative clauses.

At the very start of his learning, the foreign language learner can, however, not start learning the L2-systems directly. In order to be able to do that he first has to know a number of items. This distinction between system learning and its necessary prerequisite, item learning, is one that has recently been made by Alan Cruttenden (1981). Cruttenden's distinction applies to the child's learning of his L1, but it seems worth discussing its possible importance also for the learning of foreign languages.

According to Cruttenden, item learning "involves a form which is uniquely bonded with some other form or with a unique referent, whereas system-learning involves the possibility of the commutation of forms or referents

while some (other) form is held constant. The two stage process applies to phonology, intonation, morphology and syntax, and semantics" (1981:79) ... "Learning takes place initially on an item by item basis at all levels of language." (1981:87).

Before Cruttenden's distinction is applied to foreign language learning, the differences between the L1-learner and the L2-learner have to be discussed. The cognitive make-ups of the L1-learner and the (adult) L2-learner differ a great deal, above all in that the L2-learner already has internalized and automatized a well-developed language system on which he can draw.[1] When discussing item learning in particular, we must take account of this already existing system. Whereas a new item in the L1-learner's item learning is narrowly situation-bound, in lexis generally to one concrete referent in the outside world, the beginning L2-learner, particularly in a classroom situation, will tend to relate new items to perceived L1-translation equivalents. In foreign language learning, thus, the unique bondage characteristic of item learning can be merely cross-linguistic, in that the learner assumes full equivalence between an L1-item and an L2-item. An item in this sense can be a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, or even a phrase, as in 'tourist survival language'. A tourist with a minimal foreign language proficiency has simply memorized some useful phrases like 'Where is the toilet?', 'Do you speak English?' or 'I don't understand' without being able to construct them from his linguistic L2-system. Hakuta (1974, 1976) calls such utterances 'prefabricated phrases'.

In closed systems like phonology and morphology, item learning is a stage which does not normally last very long for the foreign language learner, at least not if the target language is genetically close to his L1. A learner easily perceives cross-linguistic equivalence between phonological and morphological items, if the L2-items are formally similar to L1-items with approximately the same function and meaning. Most learners achieve at least a receptive competence with phonological and morphological items in a related language within a short time, even though their own production of these items may be very imperfect.[2]

In grammar, the perceived functional equivalence between linguistic categories is especially important. Equivalence between individual lexical items is difficult to perceive without equivalence between categories. Finnish makes use of a complex network of lexical, syntactic (e.g. word order) and

morphological devices to express (in)definiteness, and the Finnish case endings have a much wider range of functions than English prepositions. This means that a Finnish learner, who is not used to the categories of articles and prepositions, finds it difficult to relate these high-frequency words to any previous knowledge he has. Whereas Swedish learners of English easily perceive the basic equivalence between English and Swedish prepositions and between English and Swedish articles, the Finnish beginning learner cannot get much help from his L1 in these respects. It is also a well-known fact that Finns have especially noticeable learning problems with English prepositions and articles.[3]

In the open system of lexis, item learning is not confined to the early stages of learning, but goes on throughout the learner's life. To the scientist who for his professional purposes learns Russian, item learning is of prime importance. He already masters the field and its L1-items and he can fairly safely rely on translational equivalence between scientific L1-items and L2-items. The beginning foreign language learner, on the other hand, has to oversimplify a great deal when establishing translational equivalences. Much of the system learning he has to tackle later, in fact, consists of a modification of these early assumed equivalences, when he finds that they work only to a very limited extent. He realizes, for instance, that the English word *head* is not always the equivalent of Swedish *huvud*, but sometimes may correspond to, for instance, *höjdpunkt, spets, chef* or *ledare*. The more the learner progresses, the more he perceives the inadequacies of these equivalences perceived initially.

At the beginning of his learning, then, the L2-learner learns new lexical items by associating them with either previously known, often formally similar L1-items or with actual unique referents in the real world. The latter may be a dominant procedure in second language acquisition, but in a formal language learning context establishing translational equivalences to L1-items is probably the adult learner's dominant way of learning new words. In fact, the emphasis on the importance of the L1 for L2-learning in this paper should be seen against the background of a *foreign* language learning environment, like English in Finland, where the target language is not spoken in the learner's immediate environment and where the learner learns in a classroom and/or by self-study.

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An essential element of the learner's progress in the field of vocabulary learning is that he learns to make new semantic associations, elaborations and modifications, all the time making more and more use of his newly acquired L2-knowledge and depending less on his L1-knowledge. Also, it has been suggested that the more a learner advances in his learning, the more he organizes his foreign language lexicon on the basis of semantic network associations rather than on formal similarity.[4] Formal similarity here would apply to both cross-linguistic and intra-L2 associations. The formal and functional similarity to L1-items makes L2-items more readily perceived as equivalents.

Perceived cross-linguistic equivalence, often assumed on the basis of formal similarity, must be regarded as all-important for the building up of an initial receptive competence. For productive competence, on the other hand, perceived equivalence may not have the same significance. In fact, receptive and productive competence are not affected in exactly the same way by what is perhaps the basic principle underlying language learning: that the learner tries to facilitate his learning wherever possible by making use of any relevant prior knowledge (including L1 and possible other languages[5]) he has for the task. Insufficient regard to this distinction is perhaps one reason for the somewhat surprising fact that some linguists doubt the common-sense view that it is easier to learn a related language than an unrelated one.[6]

To illustrate the difference in achieving receptive competence in related vs. unrelated languages, let us imagine four Swedish learners (identical quadruplets with no previous knowledge of any other language than the L1!) learning Danish, English, Finnish and Chinese respectively.

The learner of Danish will have little or no problem in acquiring a receptive competence. He has internalized a wide knowledge of Danish even before he has ever been confronted with any piece of spoken or written Danish at all and does not have much learning to do. Even without any teaching at all a Swede can understand all or nearly all of an ordinary written Danish text at first sight and the times he has to resort to a dictionary or other similar aid are very few. The cross-linguistic formal and functional similarities are obvious almost everywhere, and a little teaching focussing on the differences between Swedish and Danish pronunciation and some of the 'false friends' will yield good results in a matter of days. After a week or two of immersion in a Danish-speaking community the Swedish learner will usually have no difficulties in understanding spoken Danish, at least not if

his interlocutors make an effort in adjusting their speech a little by articulating more clearly than when speaking to other Danes.

The Swede learning English is not quite so fortunate. However, he, too, may acquire a basic receptive knowledge of English within a relatively short time if he works hard. His problems in comprehensiion will lie primarily in the area of lexis: although he will be immediately able to understand the meaning of a fair number of words which are similar in English and Swedish, a great many common words are so dissimilar that he cannot immediately work out what they mean. Yet he will fairly quickly, perhaps in a couple of months or so, reach the stage where he is able to read a simple English text and get a rough idea of what it is about.

The learner of Finnish, on the other hand, is up against a much more difficult task. The long words, the many case endings with their different functions, and the general lack of any recognizable formal similarities at all between Swedish and Finnish words (apart from a few low-frequency loanwords) force the learner to a very slow item-by-item procedure of learning at the beginning. Only the very diligent and very talented Swedish learner will have acquired even a basic receptive knowledge after half a year, and the cultural similarity between Sweden and Finland does not help him very much.

By far the greatest problem, however, faces the learner trying to learn Chinese. The linguistic (and the cultural) distance between Swedish and Chinese is enormous, and one year would probably be the minimum length of time required for the Swedish learner to reach the stage of understanding even simple Chinese.

It appears that the main problem for the learner attaining a receptive foreign language competence lies in whether he is able to establish equivalents to basic linguistic categories and to individual items in his L1. Where such equivalents are easily perceived, as they are between related languages, the task is of smaller magnitude [7] (or, phrased in different terms, there is much positive transfer) and the time of learning is considerably reduced. The learner of a related language simply has less to learn.

For productive competence, however, it is less absurd to claim that L2-learning is hindered rather than helped if the two languages are closely related. As Ingram (1975:273) points out, however, this belief "probably derives from the fact that observers impose different standards. English

people settling in Japan or vice versa, are rightly admired if they manage to sustain their part in any conversation so that communication is achieved at the required level. For a 'difficult' language this represents a great deal of learning, but a Norweigian can settle in Sweden and function at a similar level without doing any learning at all, beyond a few concessions on certain vocabulary items and phrases."

The high standard aimed at in L2-learning within the group of Western European languages, i.e. near-native, practically error-free production, is a stage only a very small percentage of foreign language learners ever reach. The traces of L1 in most learners' L2-production is, however, only one side of the coin: the considerable positive transfer effect is forgotten, since it is not easily noticeable.

Theoretically there is, of course, the possibility that the productive and the receptive skills are different from each other with little interaction between them. In the light of recent discussions (see e.g. Oller 1979:424 ff.) favouring the idea of a unitary language competence rather than the division of language skills into distinct components corresponding to those suggested by discrete-point testers, such a view is hardly tenable. There simply must be much interaction between receptive and productive skills during the L2-learning process: comprehension precedes production and items pass from the learner's receptive vocabulary store to his smaller productive one all the time, some items perhaps moving back again from the productive to the receptive one, when the learner forgets items he has once mastered but has not met very frequently or recently. In order to build up a productive competence it is easier for the learner if he can anchor his learning in some kind of previous L2-knowledge rather than having to start from scratch. If the learner already has a basic receptive competence, this undoubtedly provides a useful foundation for him.

The two distinctions of item learning vs. system learning and receptive competence vs. productive competence may make it worthwhile to have another look at the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) in its strong version.

According to classics like Uriel Weinreich (1953) and Robert Lado (1957), the bigger the differences between languages, the greater the difficulties for the learner will be. Although the discussion above has, I hope, made it clear that generally speaking the learning of a related language requires much less

time and effort than the learning of an unrelated one (Cf. Corder 1979, Cleveland et al. (1960)), examination of details of specific languages has led to strong criticism of the theoretical and methodological assumptions of this strong version of the CAH.

The only area where the view that linguistic difference equals learning difficulty has escaped with only minor blemishes is phonology. Lehtonen summarizes the role of the CAH in phonology in the following way:

> "On the level of the production and perception of concrete speech, the strongly criticised or often refuted claim of Weinreich's (1953:8) to the effect that 'the greater the difference between the two systems, i.e., the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of influence' is quite acceptable ... At the initial stage of foreign language studies, the amount of incorrectness in the pronunciation of the student correlates positively with the amount of phonetic difference between the target language and the native language. The problem is what method of contrastive analysis should be applied for the prediction and explanation of this kind of interference (1977:32)8.

It seems to me that the linguist's distinction between phonology, where the CAH on the whole works, and grammar and lexis, where it apparently does not work in details, might be replaced or at any rate supplemented by the distinction between item learning and system learning. The key question about the early stage of foreign language learning refers to the learner's perception of foreign language items and could perhaps be phrased in the following way:

How naturally can equivalences for items and linguistic categories be established between the L1 and the L2?

If we substitute the concept of perceived equivalence between items for the concept of linguistic difference we have placed the problem of the CAH wholly within the framework of learning processes where it clearly belongs. We remember that an important criticism of the strong version of the CAH was that it is highly problematic to bridge the gap between the psychological concept of learning difficulty existing in the learner's mind and the purely linguistic concept of differences between languages.

If cross-linguistic equivalences, though often oversimplified, can be easily perceived by the learner, as they normally can across related languages, the initial stage of item learning is greatly facilitated. But we must remember that we are dealing not with the linguist's definition of equivalence, whatever that may be, but with equivalence as the learner perceives it, and there is, of course, enormous variation between individual learners.

Kellerman (1977), Sharwood Smith (1979) and others have emphasized the importance of perceived language distance for the L2-learner. That the distance is perceived rather than 'real' puts the learner into focus, and this may well yield a wider perspective than the strictly linguistic concept of difference between languages. In the words of Juliane James, "It is not only relevant whether L1 and L2 actually differ or are the same at a particular point or not, but rather whether the learner expects or believes this to be the case. It is the learner's attitude and expectation that determines transfer or generalization within L2." (1977:12). The smaller the perceived distance between the L1 and the L2, the more relevant this prior L1-knowledge is to the learner, especially at the early stages of learning, that is, above all item learning and the mastery of a receptive competence.

The differences between learning a related and an unrelated language are to a very great extent the differences in the ease of acquisition of a basic receptive competence entailing a knowledge of a sufficient number of items at all linguistic levels. Item learning for receptive competence is greatly facilitated by the existence of corresponding linguistic categories and of cognates in the L2, between which cross-linguistic equivalence can be easily perceived.

To conclude, then: Formal and functional similarities, which are frequent between related languages facilitate the perception of cross-linguistic equivalence between individual items (phonemes, morphemes, words and phrases) in L1 and L2. The beginning foreign language learner makes frequent use of these perceived equivalences when he learns to understand the items of L2, and this receptive competence in its turn provides an important basis for building up a productive competence. The mastery of L2-systems for use in production may not in itself be directly facilitated by cross-linguistic formal similarities. For learners of a related L2, too, there are inevitable and considerable learning problems, caused not least by "patterns minimally distinct" (Oller & Ziahosseiny 1970:186), but the learner who can easily perceive cross-linquistic equivalences does not need a very long time to build up a

basic receptive competence with a knowledge of a fairly large number of items. Converting this receptive communicative competence into a productive one, the learner of a related L2 will undoubtedly make a lot of errors. However, we may at least hypothesize that most of these errors will not affect communication as seriously as errors made by learners whose L1 is very distant from the L2, although they may cause considerable irritation.

FOOTNOTES

1. There is also a difference between what these two learner categories have to learn. Basically, the L2-learner needs to learn only new labels for familiar concepts, whereas the L1-learner has to learn the concepts as well.
2. Cf. Mackey (1965:109): "If a learner ... is learning simply to understand the language, the greater the similarity between the first language and the second, the easier the latter will be to understand. In using the language, however, it is the similarity that may cause interference by the misuse of such things as deceptive cognates."
3. See e.g. Ringbom (forthcoming), Herranen (1978), Granfors & Palmberg (1976) for details about learning problems for Finns and the differences between Finnish and Finland-Swedish learners. Cf. also Oller & Redding (1971:90 f.): "G1 (students whose native languages have formal equivalents) performed better on the test of article usage than G2 (students whose native language did not have equivalents for the English articles). The differences ... were statistically significant."
4. See Meara (1978), Cook (1977) and Henning (1973).
5. See Ringbom (forthcoming) for a discussion of differences between L1-influence and influence from other languages as they are manifested in the L2-production of foreign language learners.
6. See e.g. Winitz & Reeds (1975:69): "We believe that the more two languages differ in structure the more rapid the acquisition of the second language."
7. See Corder (1979).
8. Cf. also Brown (1980:157): "In fact, it is really *only* in the phonological component of language that contrastive analysis is mildly successful."

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